

Bottom line, the AL Central is absolutely loaded. Four of the top 10-12 teams in all of baseball, and you need to win about 95 games to realistically think second place and a potential wild card berth. In his continuing preview of the American League, Jarad Regano examines the Central ... and makes his predictions on how he thinks things will shake out this season.



## **1. Kansas City Royals**

2006 Finish: 5<sup>th</sup> Place (62-100)

Key Additions: Gil Meche, David Riske, Octavio Dotel

Key Losses: Ambiorix Burgos, Andrew Cisco

2007 Outlook: You have to give the Royals points for trying, right? In the highly competitive A.L. Central, Kansas City decided that enough was enough. In a ridiculous market to begin

with, they had to overpay even more to get players to come to a perennial loser. Enter Gil Meche at 5 years and \$55 million. The Royals also were able to entice Octavio Dotel to turn down other offers for a guaranteed closer role. K.C., as usual, will also try to infuse minor league talent into their major league squad. When it is all said and done though, there is really no chance for the Royals to leapfrog any of the four solid teams ahead of them. Points for trying, yes, but they will not translate into wins.

What They Will Need to Contend: A time machine to the mid-80's.

## **1. Minnesota Twins**

2006 Finish: 1<sup>st</sup> Place (96-56)

Key Additions: Ramon Ortiz

Key Losses: Shannon Stewart, J.C. Romero, Brad Radke, Francisco Liriano (injury)

2007 Outlook: Every year you look at the Twins roster and pencil them in a spot or two below where they actually finish. This year, though, that trend will end. Despite superior player development and unrivaled management, there are just too many question marks for this year's

Twins. They will be forced to overcome budding superstar Francisco Liriano's season ending injury as well as the retirement of longtime stalwart Brad Radke. While this leaves a chance for rising prospects Boof Bonser and Matt Garza, the drop off will surely be noticed. The Twins also lost Shannon Stewart to the A's via free agency, and really did not add anyone of note.

What They Will Need to Contend: The offense will need to continue to develop, and will need no less than MVP type years from both Justin Morneau and Joe Mauer. Torii Hunter will need to return to all-star form as well. Even with the best pitcher in baseball, with limited means of acquiring help it will be tough to see the Twins playing this fall.

## **1. Cleveland Indians**

2006 Finish: 4<sup>th</sup> Place (78-84)

Key Additions: Dave Dellucci, Joe Borowski, Josh Barfield

Key Losses: Kevin Kouzmanoff

2007 Outlook: After a huge year in 2005, the Indians took a giant step back last year after losing key components Kevin Millwood and Bob Howry. Just about everything went wrong for the Tribe, particularly in the bullpen. They made it a point to address that area first and

foremost, which should help somewhat. The closer's role should be the same as last year at best, with Joe Borowski replacing Bob Wickman. Josh Barfield was acquired to fill the void left by the Brandon Phillips trade, but the cost was highly touted 3B Kevin Kouzmanoff.

What They Will Need To Contend: The Indians record should improve based on luck alone. The numbers for 2006 should have yielded a noticeably higher winning percentage. Having said that, for the second year in a row the front office did not do enough to make the Indians a playoff team. To contend, the Indians will need to stay healthy the first half of the season and be willing to acquire the missing pieces come July.

## **1. Chicago White Sox**

2006 Finish: 3<sup>rd</sup> Place (90-72)

Key Additions: Gavin Floyd, Eduardo Perez, Darin Erstad

Key Losses: Freddy Garcia, Neal Cotts, Brandon McCarthy

Outlook: The White Sox experienced the other end of the competitive Central last year, winning 90 games and only having a third place finish to show for it. GM Kenny Williams turned some heads by shipping two quality starters elsewhere, most notably Freddy Garcia to

Philadelphia. The moves were analyzed as a pre-emptive move with the current market conditions escalating, giving the Sox greater flexibility. On any note, the rotation should still be solid, and the lineup exceptional. It should even be better than last year with oft-injured Darin Erstad taking over for Brian Anderson in center, who never really was able to get on track.

What They Will Need To Contend: The bullpen newcomers will need to step up and replace the void of the veterans who are not returning. Along the way, the Sox will also have to find consistency out of a 5<sup>th</sup> starter. That task will initially be tried to fill by southpaw John Danks. Chicago should also have the ability to improve over the summer via trade.

## **1. Detroit Tigers**

2006 Finish: 2<sup>nd</sup> Place (95-67)

Key Additions: Gary Sheffield, Jose Mesa

Key Losses: Jamie Walker

Outlook: The Tigers lead most of the season until a late season surge by the Twins overtook them late. They rebounded strong in the postseason to make the World Series. The second half regression has a lot of pundits predicting a continuum of that fade this year. I feel, however, that the Tigers are poised for another strong year. This time, though, it will result in a division crown. They added the best player of anyone in the division in Gary Sheffield. The rest of their team remains virtually unchanged. The only difference is plugging a potential 35-40 home run threat in the middle of the order. The rotation stays about the same, but the club might run into some match-up problems late with rubber arm Jamie Walker bolting for

Baltimore.

What They Will Need To Contend: More than anyone, the Tigers need to stay healthy. They do have an aging, injury-plagued lineup that needs to hold up. It definitely could factor into the equation. If they do remain relatively healthy, though, the Tigers have a substantial advantage in the strong A.L. Central.